

Remarks of Rob Parenti  
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee  
February 27, 2008

Good afternoon, members of the Program Review & Investigations Committee and Education Committee. My name is Rob Parenti and I am a special education teacher in West Hartford, and hold a leadership position in the West Hartford Education Association. In this position, I get frequent opportunities to meet with teachers regarding the BEST program and how it affects their daily lives and teaching. I am here to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program. I have recently taken part in the training to be a BEST mentor, as well as a cooperating teacher for new student teachers. I have been a special education teacher of children with emotional disturbances for the past 5 years.

I would like to this opportunity to describe how I feel the BEST program can be amended to be more efficient and effective in meeting its goals for all new teachers. I believe that the program needs to be changed because it has lost its purpose and soul. The idea of the BEST portfolio should be a model of the rest of the country to use, however not in its current format. More specifically, I feel that the system should be altered to reflect a true mentor/mentee relationship that will foster trust, teacher independence, and a long-term commitment to the profession of educating today's young people. There are a lot of parties outside of the teaching communities that want to see public education fail, so it is imperative that you, the legislators, as well as the State Department of Education (SDE) listen to the feedback of the teachers who have participated in the BEST process as people who have completed portfolios and helped new teachers complete their portfolios.

In order to ensure that beginning special education teachers are truly becoming masters of their craft, they need to develop an understanding of how to handle the various and

stressful situations that occur throughout any given day. This chore can be stressful enough, but add on the task of completing a BEST portfolio in his or her second year of teaching, and it pushes most people to the brink of leaving the profession. In West Hartford, we are fortunate to have the ability to use personal days for BEST seminars, as well as having a dedicated person assigned the task of facilitating these seminars for the district. However, more can and needs to be done. More specifically, I think that:

1. Mentor teachers should be given a reduced workload during the school day to collaborate with a beginning teacher during his or her allotted planning time. This will help to keep a beginning teacher focused on the specific goals within the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching (CCT), as well as to reflect on their teaching experiences with a veteran educator to improve the quality of their teaching.
2. The SDE should require that all school systems use a common, standardized support module based on the principles noted in the CCT for special education. This can be used as proof to the various districts that beginning teachers are meeting the goals within the BEST program.
3. The SDE should permit retired teachers and/or administrators, as well as teachers on leave, to become mentors. The growing demand for quality mentors continues to grow and the source of knowledge can help meet the demand.
4. The SDE should develop a thorough training program for any potential mentor teacher that focuses on continuous re-training on a tri-annual basis with a concentration on how to provide the best possible mentoring to a beginning teacher.

If your legislative committee can act on any of these recommendations presented above, I believe you will find that the special education teacher shortage that currently exists will be reduced, and the state of Connecticut's plan of keeping young, highly educated people within its borders can be helped. This is so because the stressful and life altering BEST program will be transformed into something that is valued and appreciated, rather than feared.

In conclusion, I strongly urge and ask you to consider the recommendations of my colleagues and myself presented before you. This is feedback and concerns that are coming to you from the front lines and not from a consultant or panel. They are heartfelt and honest, as well as a bottom-up solution to a program that was created from the top-down.

Thank you for your time.

